

## RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, THE HERMENEUTICS OF DESIRE, AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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*The article investigates religious experience in relation to the hermeneutics of desire and interreligious dialogue. After summarizing Schleiermacher's thought on religious experience, the article presents some ideas on religious experience in light of the insights of several contemporary thinkers. Robert Doran's proposal for a hermeneutics of desire is enlisted to help clarify the nature of religious experience. The article concludes by suggesting that further study of the notion of desire, especially as it relates to religious experience, holds out some promising possibilities for interreligious dialogue.*

IN THE RECENT HISTORY of theological discourse the notion of religious experience has proven to be attractive, complex, polemical, and, perhaps most curiously, persistent. As I point out below, the “culprits” responsible for this state of affairs are many and represent a diversity of confessional backgrounds. One consequence of such diversity is that the range of viewpoints concerning the meaning of this notion as well as its use as a theological category is vast and multivalent. To avoid getting lost in a maze of ambiguity when dealing with the notion of religious experience, it is helpful to (1) mark out clear parameters for how it is going to be used and (2) consider it in light of a specific situation or question. Following these directives, I propose to reflect on religious experience in relation to the notion of desire and in the larger context of the problematic of religious diversity and the challenges posed by interreligious dialogue. More specifically, I will concern myself with two basic questions: (1) how might we conceive of the relationship between

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religious experience and desire, and (2) to what extent can reflection on these two themes be used to facilitate and perhaps even promote dialogue among persons committed to different religious traditions?

In proposing some answers to these questions I proceed as follows. First, I begin with a sketch of how the notion of religious experience emerged onto the theological landscape with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and the rise of theological liberalism. I then focus on how religious experience has been understood and critiqued (especially in regard to its possibility as a category for interreligious dialogue) by several theologians who have worked in the postliberal or postmodern era. I then highlight some recent reflections on the notion of desire that draw out two of its distinct, though intimately, related dimensions, namely, the spiritual and the sensitive/psychic dimensions. I then take up the question of the relationship between grace and desire, with special reference to the Roman Catholic tradition and its sacramental system. Finally, I conclude with some questions intended to encourage further reflection on these themes from a comparative perspective.

### **RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN MODERN/LIBERAL THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER**

Historically speaking, the notions of experience in general and of religious experience in particular are relative newcomers on the theological scene. It is widely acknowledged that Friedrich Schleiermacher, commonly referred to as “the father of modern theology,” inaugurated the “turn to experience,” which was itself responsible for the corollary “turn to the subject.”<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kelly observes that in promoting these “turns” to “a subjective, relational faith emerging from human experience,” Schleiermacher challenged Enlightenment skepticism and rationalism.<sup>2</sup> James Fredericks summarizes Schleiermacher’s initial concern with religious experience:

Schleiermacher set for himself the task of rendering religion credible once again by freeing Christian piety from its eroded foundations in metaphysics and historical claims to authority. Religion, he claimed, is a matter of intuition, sense, or

<sup>1</sup> Like all great thinkers, Schleiermacher had his predecessors to whom he was indebted. Regarding the notion of religious experience, one such influential predecessor is Plato, specifically his account of empirical being and its relation to the intelligible realm of forms. See Robert R. Williams, *Schleiermacher the Theologian: The Construction of the Doctrine of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 57–73.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Kelly, *Theology at the Void: The Retrieval of Experience* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2002) 12.

feeling and should be considered a matter of doctrine only secondarily. . . . Even before it is doctrine, religion is an experience, what Schleiermacher in the *Speeches* [1799] called the “sense of the Infinite.”<sup>3</sup>

Fredericks helpfully draws attention to Schleiermacher’s claim that the “sense of the Infinite” is ineffable, and summarizes the significance of this claim:

Epistemologically, the Infinite is experienced prior to Kant’s categories. This claim allows Schleiermacher to arrive at two conclusions: (1) this experience is one of sheer immediacy which is only later sundered by thought, and (2) this experience ultimately defies final description and definition and is thus knowable only by direct personal acquaintance.<sup>4</sup>

Twenty-two years after the publication of the *Speeches*, Schleiermacher’s thinking on religious experience underwent a significant development that came to the fore in his major dogmatic work, *Glaubenslehre*, translated as *The Christian Faith*. There he describes religious experience as the “feeling of absolute dependence.”<sup>5</sup> Of particular importance to my discussion—and a point to which I return below—is the recurring claim that this feeling or experience precedes any sort of linguistic and conceptual apparatus, and/or knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

As regards the identification of absolute dependence with “relation to God” in our proposition: this is to be understood in the sense that the *Whence* of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is to be designated by the word “God,” and that this is for us the really original signification of that word.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> James Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22 (1995) 67–87, at 69–70. As Schleiermacher put it, “In itself it [religion] is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God.” And again, “true religion is sense and taste for the Infinite” (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman, intro. Rudolf Otto [New York: Harper & Row, 1958] 36, 39). Fredericks insightfully observes that in the original German texts, Schleiermacher did not once use the noun *Erlebnis* (experience) or the verbal form *Erleben*. He did, however, use closely related words such as *Gefühl* (one’s feeling) and *Empfindung* (feeling). See Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience?” 69 n. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience?” 70.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968) 16 and passim. This point is the heart of Schleiermacher’s thesis no. 4: “The self-identical essence of piety, is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God” (12).

<sup>6</sup> Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience?” 71. See also Kelly, *Theology at the Void* 35.

<sup>7</sup> Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* 16.

A final remark that must be made before moving onto Schleiermacher's successors concerns his opinions on the presence of religious experience (as he understood it) in religious traditions other than Christianity. Schleiermacher did not regard all religions as more or less equally valid responses to the same ultimate reality, or as he would be inclined to say, to the "Infinite" or "Other."<sup>8</sup> While his apologetics was certainly directed toward the skepticism and rationalism of Enlightenment thinking, it also sought to secure Christianity's superiority vis-à-vis other religions. He argues this point quite clearly, saying that Christianity can be related to other religions on the basis that all religions can be distinguished according to different stages of development and different kinds (genera) or species.<sup>9</sup> Though he acknowledges that the religions can be related (or, as we today might prefer to say, compared) to one another, he assumes that all Christians are united in the conviction that Christianity is, nevertheless, exclusively superior.<sup>10</sup> Given the historical context in which he was working, it is striking that Schleiermacher did not base his claim to Christian superiority on the premise that other religions are completely false. In fact, he affirms the opposite, both for the religions that are at the same stage of development as Christianity (i.e., monotheism) as well

<sup>8</sup> For a fine summary as well as an extensive discussion and critique of the pluralistic hypothesis as a specific option in the theology of religions, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 2010) 26–27, 109–45. For a recent defense of the pluralistic hypothesis see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Pluralisms: How to Appreciate Religious Diversity Theologically," in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, ed. Paul Hedges and Alan Race (London: SCM, 2008) 99–103.

<sup>9</sup> Schleiermacher specifies that even if two different religions, such as Greek and Indian polytheism, pertain to the same stage of development, they can be of different kinds. Thus, parity in the stage of development does not necessarily imply parity of kind, much less parity in regard to salvific value. See Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* 32. This idea of classifying the religions was used by the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* no. 16. In his commentary on this article, Francis Sullivan notes that "five groups of people are distinguished on the basis of the source and kind of knowledge of God that is characteristic of each group. They are listed in descending order, from those whose knowledge of God is closest to Christian faith, to those who have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God" (Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* [New York: Paulist, 1992] 154). For the full text of *Lumen gentium* see *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 2:849–98 (hereafter Tanner). All subsequent references to the documents of the council will be to this edition.

<sup>10</sup> This same point is made when he states that it is precisely because of the comparison of Christianity with other religions that one can conclude that Christianity is in fact "the most perfect of the most highly developed forms of religion" (Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* 38).

as for those he deems to be at lower stages (i.e., polytheism). In this regard he says that the other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam) cannot be entirely false for the very reason that they are monotheistic and therefore belong to the same (and highest) stage of development as Christianity.<sup>11</sup> As for the polytheistic religions, he maintains that they must have some trace of truth in them because they “can be a basis of receptivity for the higher truth of Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the convictions outlined above anticipate the much later Roman Catholic doctrine on the religions, specifically the teaching that truth and holiness are really (albeit not fully) present in other religious traditions.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 33, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 33. While this claim may incline one to think of the patristic concept of *preparatio evangelica*, there is a crucial difference between Schleiermacher and the Church Fathers. This difference is brought to light by Eusebius of Caesarea, particularly in his apologetic work, *Preparation for the Gospel*. According to his understanding of salvation history, Christ is at the center, and only his gospel is salvific. At the same time, he acknowledges that a preparation for the gospel is found uniquely among the Hebrew people. Thus, as summarized by Joseph Carola, “no salvific good originates separately from or exists independently of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” Eusebius also offers a positive appraisal of the Greek philosophical tradition (especially Plato) to the extent that it resonates with older Hebrew revelation. The notable difference between Eusebius and other patristic thinkers and Schleiermacher is that the former categorically reject polytheism. For example, Eusebius rather caustically says that pagan polytheistic oracles are demonic deceptions and that their rituals are a fraud and a monstrosity. On the concept of *preparatio evangelica* in patristic thought, see Joseph Carola, “Non-Christians in Patristic Theology,” in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl Josef Becker and Ilaria Moralli (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010) 23–48, esp. 34–48. This concept appeared in the preconciliar theology of Henri de Lubac: *Catholicisme: Les aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris: Cerf, 1941) 218. During Vatican II, the idea of *preparatio evangelica* came to the fore via the idea that people of other religious traditions possess “seeds of the Word” (*semina Verbi*), see *Ad gentes* no. 11 in Tanner 2:1020. See also Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* 167. Following the council, both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II appeal to this notion. Paul VI did so in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* no. 53, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html); while John Paul II turned his attention to it in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* nos. 28, 29, 56, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html). (All URLs cited herein were accessed on April 20, 2013). See also Ilaria Moralli, “Salvation, Religions, and Dialogue in the Roman Magisterium: From Pius XI to Vatican II and Postconciliar Popes,” in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions* 122–50.

<sup>13</sup> The Catholic Church first officially expressed this doctrine in *Nostra aetate* no. 2: “The catholic church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these [other] religions” (Tanner 2:969).

In summary, Schleiermacher's willingness to acknowledge elements of truth in the religions, as well as his claim that they can serve as a preparation for Christianity (even if they are polytheistic), leads one to believe that they must evince and in some cases promote a "sense of the Infinite," even if it remains to be more fully developed via Christian doctrine and practice. In other words, the church holds that religious experience is not exclusive in the sense that it is available only to professed Christians.

### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN POSTMODERN/POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

The passing of modernity and the advent of postmodernity witnessed the rise of new concerns, chief among which were the problems, but also the possibilities, occasioned by religious diversity. Along with this concern there emerged a new outlook on the part of many Christians who could no longer presume the superiority of Christianity. In this context, the notion of religious experience continued to attract the attention of Christian theologians and religious scholars.<sup>14</sup> Four of the most prominent thinkers who have recently reflected on religious experience and in this way share in the responsibility for securing its place on the theological agenda for the foreseeable future are George Lindbeck, Wayne Proudfoot, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan. While all these thinkers are in some way indebted to Schleiermacher, they also advanced their own positions, some of which are at stark variance with one another. I will now consider the most significant features of their respective understandings of religious experience, as well as how they evaluated it as a theological category for dialogue.

#### George Lindbeck and Wayne Proudfoot

In 2010, George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* reached the 25th anniversary of its publication. Bruce Marshall recently reminded us that the book put forth the "controversial call to understand Christianity as a unique cultural-linguistic system, rooted in the life and practice of a particular community, and governed by its own

<sup>14</sup> The term "postmodernity" is notoriously ambiguous, perhaps because the postmodern era is itself characterized by ambiguity in the sense that an extensive multiplicity and diversity of perspectives often issue in contrasting truth claims. For further commentary on the meaning of postmodernity see Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003) 51–55; and Fred Lawrence, "The Fragility of Consciousness: Lonergan and the Postmodern Concern for the Other," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 55–94, esp. 55–68.

rules.”<sup>15</sup> Within his theological proposal Lindbeck conceives of the nature and role of religious experience, as subsequent to and, indeed, dependent upon the various doctrinal systems of the religions. Thus, in contrast to Schleiermacher, Lindbeck reverses the priority of inner and outer experiences such that religious experience (inner) is conceived of as derivative of the cultural-linguistic conceptual frameworks (outer) within which any and all experience necessarily emerges.<sup>16</sup> In accord with this conviction, Lindbeck argues that “the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied as the interpretive schemes they embody.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, it becomes impossible to uphold the idea that the religions objectify an ineffable and universal experience of the absolute.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately Lindbeck is cautious and even pessimistic when it comes to the possibility of a meaningful inter-religious dialogue based on a supposedly common religious experience.<sup>19</sup>

Lindbeck’s contemporary Wayne Proudfoot also made a significant contribution to the discussion on religious experience. He sharply criticized any suggestion (à la Schleiermacher) that there might be an inner, common, and, as such, universal religious experience, and took Schleiermacher to task for a fundamental incompatibility:

First, he [Schleiermacher] contends that ideas and principles are foreign to religion and that piety is a matter of feeling, sense, or taste distinct from and prior to concepts and beliefs. Second, he identifies piety as a sense and taste for the infinite, an identification that requires reference to God, to all, or the universe. The identification of a moment of feeling as religious assumes not only reference to God or the infinite as the object of the feeling but also a judgment that this feeling is the result of divine operation. Both of these components are required by Schleiermacher’s program, and they are incompatible. . . . In his later work [*The Christian Faith*] Schleiermacher renders each of these components more precise, but the incompatibility remains.<sup>20</sup>

The charge, then, is that any claim for an immediate religious experience contradicts itself for the very reason that it presupposes the thought (i.e., concepts and beliefs) necessary for it to be identified as such.<sup>21</sup> In consonance with Lindbeck, Proudfoot prefers to conceive of religious

<sup>15</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, “Introduction: The Nature of Doctrine after 25 Years,” in George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) vii–xxviii, at xi.

<sup>16</sup> Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* 34. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

<sup>18</sup> Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience?” 79.

<sup>19</sup> To this effect Lindbeck concluded, “The currently favorite motive of cooperatively exploring common experiences is not entirely excluded, but it is not likely to dominate” (*Nature of Doctrine* 39).

<sup>20</sup> Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

experience as being constituted by, and therefore derivative of, concepts and beliefs that emerge from linguistic systems.<sup>22</sup> In the end, to obtain any understanding of religious experience and to formulate a description of the experience from the perspective of the subject, we need to attend, in the first place, to the linguistic forms and practices that constitute the framework of the experience.<sup>23</sup>

In using religious experience as a theological category for dialogue, Proudfoot points out both problems and possibilities. As to problems, he claims that religious experience “is biased toward theism and the conception of a creator.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, even if this category could be used in a coherent manner by dispensing with any claim to universality, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to employ it beyond the theistic horizon, so to speak. Somewhat more positively, he posits that “there is no reason, in principle, to despair about the possibility of understanding the experience of persons and communities that are historically and culturally remote from the interpreter.”<sup>25</sup> To be sure, such an understanding is possible in the measure that we can understand and perhaps even value the linguistic systems of those who are different from ourselves, perhaps even radically so.<sup>26</sup>

While Lindbeck and Proudfoot brought the role of language and the art of interpretation to the forefront of the discussion on religious experience, two of their contemporary Catholic thinkers developed rather different positions by being far more sympathetic to Schleiermacher’s suggestion that there is a prelinguistic, preconceptual, and pre-interpretive component of religious experience that is universal and therefore not wholly determined by linguistic and/or conceptual apparatuses.

### **Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner**

Central to Lonergan’s proposal of a universalist view of religious experience is his description of it as a conscious dynamic state of being in love, a state occasioned by a transcultural “inner core” of God’s love that is “gifted” to all men and women.<sup>27</sup> Recalling Rudolph Otto, Paul Tillich, and Saint Ignatius Loyola, he elaborated on this claim by describing it

<sup>22</sup> Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* 219. See also Proudfoot, “Explaining Religious Experience,” in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 336–52, at 350.

<sup>23</sup> Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* 219.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 19. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 219.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990) 106, 284.



as an experience of the holy (i.e., a *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*), of being grasped by ultimate concern and experiencing consolation without previous cause.<sup>28</sup> In the broader context of this study, in which the notion of desire figures prominently, Lonergan also speaks of religious experience as a gift that precedes knowledge of God and that at the same time causes us to seek such knowledge.<sup>29</sup> That is, the reception of the gift sparks a desire for specifically theistic knowledge. In Christian terms, it can be said that the desire for God is an important component of the “inner core” of religious experience.

Lonergan defended the view that while religious experience is primordial interior, it does admit outward expression in a variety of ways and in accord with the beliefs and practices of the world’s religions.<sup>30</sup> A crucial component of this universalist view is that despite the significant differences in such beliefs and practices, they are united in that they allow religious experience to be concretely, externally expressed. To support this point he appealed, on more than one occasion, to Friedrich Heiler’s identification of seven areas that he deemed to be common to several of the world’s religions.<sup>31</sup> Two of these areas deal directly with religious experience as it is concretely, and indeed visibly, expressed by religiously committed persons. Following Heiler, Lonergan affirms that religious experience can be expressed by acts of repentance, self-denial, and prayer.<sup>32</sup> An example of this sort of expression cited by Lonergan in a tradition other than Christianity is the statue of the Buddha, which, he says, “radiate[s] a serenity that reveals what might be meant by authenticity attained.”<sup>33</sup> In

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 106. “Consolation without previous cause” is a phenomenon that Ignatius Loyola writes about in his *Spiritual Exercises*. According to Harvey Egan this phenomenon is a certain type of consolation that only God can give; it is “the God-given consolation.” Moreover, it is a consolation that has not been explicitly asked for or even desired by the exercitant (Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises and the Ignatian Mystical Horizon* [St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976] 34–35).

<sup>29</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 340. Lonergan notes that this idea was well expressed by Pascal when he said, “Take comfort, you would not be seeking me if you had not already found me” (341 n. 6).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., ibid. 109; and Lonergan, “The Future of Christianity,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan, S.J., and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S.J. (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996) 149–63, esp. 149–51.

<sup>32</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 109.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Lonergan, “First Lecture: Religious Experience,” in *A Third Collection* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 115–128, at 123. On Lonergan’s use of the Buddha as an example of the expression of religious experience, see Frederick E. Crowe, “Lonergan’s Universalist View of Religion,” in *Developing the Lonergan Legacy: Historical, Theoretical, and Existential Themes*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004) 111–41, at 126.

addition, and along with Heiler, Lonergan maintains that religious experience is expressed by the ways human beings relate to one another. He appealed to Saint Paul to identify these ways of relating as ones that evidence acts of kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22).<sup>34</sup> With this claim Lonergan affirms that religious experience has a distinctive ethical component: it has concrete ramifications for what we do and ultimately for who we are.

A few years after the publication of *Method in Theology* Lonergan revisited the universalist view and drew a distinction between the infrastructure and the superstructure of experience. He makes this distinction on the basis of his notion of differentiations of consciousness, which posits that human beings are conscious in different ways and, metaphorically speaking, on different levels. The four well-defined levels are labeled as empirical, intellectual, rational, and responsible.<sup>35</sup> In brief review, on the level of experience we are aware of data; on the intellectual level we understand what the data are; on the rational level we judge the veracity of our understanding; and on the responsible level we decide what is to be done in light of our knowledge and act in function of it.<sup>36</sup>

In regard to the possibility of a universal religious experience, Lonergan suggests that on the most basic empirical level there is an “inner religious factor [that] resembles an infrastructure.”<sup>37</sup> It is this inner factor that allows religious experience to be universal. In other words, what is inner is also what is common and, as such, is shared among human beings, regardless of religious creed. In light of the discussion concerning the transcultural “inner core” of religious experience, this “inner religious factor” could be specified as the experience of being in love unrestrictedly. As infrastructure, religious experience is the so-called “pure experience” that precedes

<sup>34</sup> See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 106; and Lonergan, “First Lecture: Religious Experience” 126.

<sup>35</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 9. Lonergan broached the possibility of a fifth level of consciousness as the experience of being loved unconditionally by God and invited to love God in return, but he never fully developed this notion. See Bernard Lonergan, “Lecture 2: The Functional Specialty ‘Systematics,’” in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965–1980*, ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004) 179–98, at 193. Lonergan scholars have advanced a discussion of the “fifth level”—see, e.g., Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, “Sanctifying Grace in a ‘Methodical Theology,’” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007) 52–76; and Jeremy Blackwood, “Sanctifying Grace, Elevation, and the Fifth Level of Consciousness,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 2 (2011) 143–62.

<sup>36</sup> Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 9.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Lonergan, “Prolegomena to the Study of Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time,” in *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist, 1985) 55–73, at 58.

concepts, language, and knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Recall that for Lonergan knowledge emerges from a process that entails experience, understanding, and judgment. It is this process that constitutes the suprastructure, which I will now consider in further detail.

On the level of suprastructure, experiences (religious or otherwise) are explicitly appealed to when the “experiencer” asks, “What is it?” In asking and answering this question, language is needed first to name experiences and then to distinguish and relate them to one another.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, it is on the level of suprastructure that religious experience can be interpreted and eventually known.<sup>40</sup> While “infrastructure” and “suprastructure” indicate contrast, knowledge of experience requires the combination of both levels. Without the infrastructure, there is nothing to understand and eventually know, while without the suprastructure, knowing remains an elusive, though probably desirable, possibility.<sup>41</sup>

Rahner’s universalist perspective coheres quite closely with Lonergan’s.<sup>42</sup> Rahner agrees with Lonergan’s view that experience is primordial and in this sense prior to any interpretive formulation: “The experience of God which we are pointing to here is not some subsequent emotional reaction to doctrinal instruction about the existence and nature of God which we receive from without and at the theoretical level. Rather it is prior to any

<sup>38</sup> See Lonergan, “Emerging Religious Consciousness” 58; and Lonergan, “Religious Experience” 116.

<sup>39</sup> Lonergan, “Emerging Religious Consciousness” 58; Lonergan, “Religious Experience” 116–17.

<sup>40</sup> In making “interpretation” the second “functional specialty,” Lonergan made the case for its inclusion in any intellectual enterprise, theological or otherwise, that seeks to generate cumulative and progressive results. At the same time, he was highly critical of certain trends that overvalued the role of hermeneutics by reducing problems that belong to the other functional specialties to hermeneutical ones: “The most striking feature of much contemporary discussion of hermeneutics is that it attempts to treat all of these issues [problems in history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics and communications] as if they were hermeneutical. They are not” (Lonergan, *Method in Theology* 155).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 117. For further commentary on Lonergan’s universalist view of religion, see Crowe, “Lonergan’s Universalist View of Religion” 111–41.

<sup>42</sup> Where Lonergan speaks of “religious experience,” Rahner tends to speak of “the experience of God.” This slight terminological difference raises the question of whether it could be said that in choosing to speak of religion, Lonergan is in fact more of a universalist than his Jesuit confrere. Does avoiding reference to the Christian God imply that Lonergan is somehow more open and more willing to listen to and learn from other religious traditions than Rahner is? Answering this question would require a detailed examination of the relevant texts, and that would exceed the scope of this article. Such an examination, however, might yield helpful insights into the theology of religions as it was developed by these two great thinkers.

such teaching, underlies it, and has to be there already for it to be made intelligible at all.”<sup>43</sup> Kelly observed that with this claim “Rahner explicitly rejects both Proudfoot’s and Lindbeck’s understanding of doctrine (or belief) as *solely* constructive of experience.”<sup>44</sup> Rahner, like Lonergan, recognizes the significance of both language and interpretation. He insists that language clarifies experience by enabling one to uncover and understand its meaning.<sup>45</sup> The converse, he notes, is also true, that is, experience clarifies language: “One who has been formed by a common language, and educated and indoctrinated from without, experiences clearly perhaps only very slowly what he has been talking about for a long time.”<sup>46</sup> Rahner is here drawing attention to the fact that experience can elucidate the meaning of doctrines. In relation to this point I will appeal to John Henry Newman’s use of the terms “real apprehension” and “assent” to clarify what Rahner seems to be getting at.<sup>47</sup> In these Newmanian terms, it could be said that it is on the basis of experience that doctrines can be both really apprehended and assented to as true. Terrence Merrigan aptly summarizes these complex ideas: “*Real Apprehension* occurs when religious doctrines are ‘regarded’ as referring to ‘some-thing’ which can be experienced. *Real assent* is the recognition that what the doctrine says is true, *in the sense* that it resonates with some aspect of our actual experience of life.”<sup>48</sup> The significance that both Newman and Rahner assign to experience in terms of its potential to condition both apprehension and assent in doctrinal matters certainly seems justified in light of the fact that people often affirm or negate doctrines (i.e., make judgments of value) on the basis of their own experience(s).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Experience of God Today,” in *Confrontations*, Theological Investigations 11, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1974) 149–65, at 153.

<sup>44</sup> Kelly, *Theology at the Void* 134. See also Matthew Petillo, “The Universalist Philosophy of Religious Experience and the Challenges of Post-Modernism,” *Heythrop Journal* 51 (2010) 946–61, at 947.

<sup>45</sup> Kelly, *Theology at the Void* 134.

<sup>46</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 16.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed., intro., notes by I. T. Ker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 13–14, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Terrence Merrigan, “Newman on Faith in the Trinity,” in *Newman and Faith*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (Louvain: Peeters, 2004) 93–116, at 96.

<sup>49</sup> Doctrines dealing with matters of human sexuality provide a good example of an area in which human experience is often appealed to in the discernment of truth. Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler recently made a case for a more holistic sexual anthropology in which human experience is given due consideration in analyzing any doctrinal teaching. See Todd A. Salzman and Michael G.

In summary, contemporary thought on the nature and role of religious experience is clearly polyvalent. One advantage of such variance and consequent lack of consensus is that it can spur further reflection. In the following section I explore some recently formulated insights into the notion of desire introduced by René Girard and developed by Robert Doran and John Dadosky. A nuanced understanding of desire might help clarify the nature of religious experience and thereby serve as a category to facilitate interreligious dialogue.<sup>50</sup>

### THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF DESIRE

Like the notion of religious experience, the notion of desire is broad and admits multiple understandings and practical applications, perhaps most especially in regard to ethical issues. To be sure, the close connection between desire and ethics ought not be surprising for the very reason that the motivational force of desire contributes in large part to what persons do, that is, how they act. Doran has recently made an important contribution to theological reflection on desire by identifying “two quite distinct, but intimately related dimensions of desire,” namely, the sensitive/psychic and spiritual dimensions.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on the thought of both Lonergan and Girard, Doran proposes a “hermeneutics of desire”<sup>52</sup> to explain the dynamics of desire, that is, how it concretely functions in various facets of human living, including the grave challenges that arise from the problem of evil and the desire to be redeemed from it.<sup>53</sup> In the following paragraphs I appeal to Doran’s insights in order to develop a line of thought that highlights the profound significance of desire for religious experience.

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Lawler, “Theology, Science, and Sexual Anthropologies: An Investigation,” *Louvain Studies* 35 (2011) 69–97, esp. 92.

<sup>50</sup> No one should imagine that using religious experience as a category for interreligious dialogue is easy or unproblematic. The notion of religious experience is complex, but trying to work through its complexity in dialogue with other religious persons can be a very fruitful process.

<sup>51</sup> Robert M. Doran, “The Nonviolent Cross: Lonergan and Girard on Redemption,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010) 46–61, at 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> He draws Lonergan and Girard into conversation on soteriology by invoking Lonergan’s scissors metaphor: Lonergan’s “Law of the Cross” is the upper blade, and Girard’s notions of acquisitive mimesis, mimetic rivalry and violence, and the victim mechanism constitute the lower blade. The meeting of these two blades allows the data supplied by the Law of the Cross and mimetic rivalry to be clarified and the doctrine of soteriology to be better understood. See Doran, “The Nonviolent Cross” 50–51. For Lonergan’s explanation of the scissors metaphor see for instance his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) 600–601.

According to Doran, to speak intelligibly about desire we must first acknowledge it as an element of consciousness.<sup>54</sup> Following Lonergan, he highlights two dimensions of consciousness that are in fact correlative to the two dimensions of desire.<sup>55</sup> The two dimensions of consciousness are the sensitive/psychic dimension, and the spiritual dimension. With regard to the former, human beings are sensitively conscious in the measure that they are imaginative, desirous, and generally sensitive beings (i.e., they feel). Thus, as humans we imagine, desire, and feel simply by virtue of the fact that we are conscious. On Doran's view, in this first dimension there is a "preponderance of 'undergoing' [consciousness]" in the sense that the conscious operations are more or less spontaneous.<sup>56</sup> In the second dimension we subject the elements of sensitive consciousness to understanding, judgment/evaluation, and decision, and so are more actively conscious. This same point could be made by using the "language of desire": in the spiritual dimension of consciousness we desire to intelligently understand, reasonably judge, and responsibly decide and act.<sup>57</sup> In Lonergan's terms, one could say that in this dimension of consciousness, the transcendental dynamism of the human spirit is allowed to unfold, which enables the human person to be self-transcendent and thereby authentic.<sup>58</sup> This reference to Lonergan also points up what Doran means by "spiritual." Spirit refers specifically to the human spirit whose transcendental capacity is actualized by asking and answering different sorts of questions that ultimately lead to responsible decisions and actions.

<sup>54</sup> I rely on Lawrence's clarification of Lonergan's understanding of consciousness, which includes both a foreground awareness of perceivable objects and a background awareness of ourselves as ourselves (i.e., self-awareness). See Lawrence, "Fragility of Consciousness" 59.

<sup>55</sup> "Both ways of being conscious are also ways of desiring" (Doran, "Non-violent Cross" 48). Doran first published his thought on the two ways of being conscious in "Imitating the Divine Relations: A Theological Contribution to Mimetic Theory," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 23 (2005) 149–86, at 169–70.

<sup>56</sup> Doran, "Nonviolent Cross" 48.

<sup>57</sup> Grouping decision and action risks giving the impression that the latter necessarily follows from the former. The "facts of life," however, show that decision does not guarantee action. As Lonergan put it, "It is one thing to decide what one is to make of oneself. . . . It is another to execute the decision. Today's resolutions do not predetermine the free choice of tomorrow, of next week, or next year, or ten years from now" ("*Existenz and Aggiornamento*," in *Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993] 222–31, at 224).

<sup>58</sup> For Lonergan's explanation of how human beings are transcendental and indeed self-transcendent, see *Method in Theology* 104–5.

In sum, while Lonergan accents the spiritual dimension of desire, Girard brings out the sensitive/psychic dimension. To be sure, Lonergan's contribution to the spiritual dimension stems from his rather positive anthropological vision that affirms the self-transcendent nature of human beings. As for Girard, his contribution to the consideration of the psychic dimension of desire issues from his reflections on the nature and role of acquisitive or appropriative mimetic desire. I now consider this in more detail.

It is important to realize that mimetic desire is not per se acquisitive or appropriative. In itself, it is good.<sup>59</sup> Dadosky recently argued this, pointing out that mimetic desire has its roots in the processes of human development and is an essential component of the learning process.<sup>60</sup> For instance, in imitating or modeling heroes, people—perhaps most especially children—may learn to be altruistic and so develop as selfless persons willing to forego self-interest and/or self-satisfaction for the good of others.<sup>61</sup> Girard's main concern, however, is not with mimetic desire as good per se but as acquisitive or appropriative.<sup>62</sup>

To render the following discussion more fluid, I will refer to acquisitive or appropriative desire as mimetic desire or simply mimesis. The dynamics of mimetic desire can be described as follows:

When two or more people want [desire] the same thing, acquisitive mimesis leads to rivalry, which often results in conflict and even violence. The buildup of psychic contagion, the rapid and often unconscious spread of envy in a group, often leads to violence upon an innocent victim or scapegoat. The catharsis resulting from this violence against the scapegoat, which for Girard amounts to a sacrifice, restores equilibrium in the community, assuaging the intracommunal conflict, at least temporarily, until the mimetic rivalry builds momentum again.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 2005) 62–65. For Girard's defense of mimetic desire's intrinsic goodness, see his interview with Rebecca Adams, published as "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion and Literature* 25.2 (Summer 1993) 9–33.

<sup>60</sup> John D. Dadosky, "Woman without Envy: Toward Reconceiving the Immaculate Conception," *Theological Studies* 72 (2011) 15–40, at 24. Dadosky also notes that this theory is supported by social learning theory, particularly as advanced by Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura. See John D. Dadosky, "'Naming the Demon': The 'Structure' of Evil in Lonergan and Girard," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75 (2010) 355–72, at 357.

<sup>61</sup> Dadosky, "Woman without Envy" 24.

<sup>62</sup> Girard's focus on mimetic desire as acquisitive or appropriative led Dadosky to conclude that he "is perhaps too suspicious of human desiring" ("Naming the Demon" 370).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* For Girard's more detailed explanation see *Girard Reader* 9–10. As a concrete example of where mimetic desire and its violent consequences can

At this point I raise the pertinent question, How can the violence that begins with mimetic desire and ends with the scapegoat mechanism be overcome or, otherwise stated, transcended? For Girard, such transcendence cannot be achieved without first recognizing what is actually going on. Therefore, the first step to overcoming the scapegoat mechanism is to expose it for what it really is. Girard argues that such exposure happened in a unique way in biblical revelation, most especially in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Girard maintains that these events served at least two purposes. First, they revealed the scapegoat mechanism for what it is, thereby displaying the innocence of the victim.<sup>64</sup> Second, Jesus' resurrection provided hope and engendered the expectation that the cycle of violence can actually be overcome in human history.<sup>65</sup> It is crucial to note that any such hope relies on God's self-communication through grace. Hence, grace is necessary if mimetic desire and its violent consequences are to be transcended.<sup>66</sup>

Though Lonergan did not specify that evil is a consequence of mimetic desire, the basic problem concerned him deeply. Moreover, like Girard, he insisted that any solution to the problem of evil cannot be achieved by purely natural means. Dadosky captures this conviction well: "Evil is a limit that human beings cannot transcend themselves."<sup>67</sup> In addition to positing that the solution to the problem of evil requires something more than human effort, Dadosky's claim also opens up a line of questioning into the very nature of evil. While this is not my primary concern here, I wish to address it briefly.

Dadosky's claim raises this question: How does evil place a limit on human beings? An answer to this question can be drawn from Doran's observation that in Lonergan's view (which has its roots in the Scholastic

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be found, Doran cites academic institutions, where the desire to know (in itself good) can be infected and derailed by acquisitive mimesis, thereby perverting the true vocation of the academic (Doran, "Imitating the Divine Relations" 82).

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., René Girard, *Sacrifice*, trans. Matthew Petillo and David Dawson (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2011) 71; and Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone, 1978) 167–70, 279.

<sup>65</sup> "To recognize Christ as God is to recognize him as the only being capable of rising above the violence that had, up to that point, absolutely transcended mankind. Violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure, and Christ is the only agent who is capable of escaping from these structures and *freeing us from their dominance*" (Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* 219, emphasis added).

<sup>66</sup> Girard makes this claim when he says that Jesus' disciples were able to be transformed so as to be able to "advocate for the truth of Christ and the Kingdom of God . . . through the power of grace alone" (*Girard Reader* 279).

<sup>67</sup> Dadosky, "Naming the Demon" 369.



tradition), the evils of the human race are defects of the good or *privationes boni*.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, these “evils” can be understood according to two related categories, basic sin and moral evil:

Basic sin is a failure of free human beings to choose a morally obligatory course of action, or their failure to reject a morally reprehensible course of action. Moral evil is the consequence of such failure. Moral evil includes the deterioration of human relations, the systematizing of injustice, the elevation of various forms of bias to the determining principles of human affairs, and the summation of all these evils in violence.<sup>69</sup>

Thus conceived, evil limits human freedom by restricting our capacity to do the good.<sup>70</sup>

Returning to the question of the solution to the problem of evil, in the final chapter of *Insight*, entitled “Special Transcendent Knowledge,” Lonergan sketches a 31-point heuristic structure that indicates how a solution might be achieved and what it might look like. Particularly suggestive is his conviction that “the existence of a solution to the problem of evil is affirmed because of divine wisdom, divine goodness, and divine omnipotence.”<sup>71</sup> This claim allows him to conclude: “It follows that the new and higher collaboration [in the development of a solution to the problem of evil] is not the work of man alone, but principally the work of God.”<sup>72</sup> And furthermore, it is “under the action of divine grace” that human beings are given the faith, hope, and charity that are constitutive of the “absolutely supernatural solution to man’s problem

<sup>68</sup> Doran, “Nonviolent Cross” 57.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. For Lonergan’s explanation of the various forms of bias see *Insight* 214–23, 244–53. For a recent summary of the notion of bias see John R. Friday, “Critical Realism as a Philosophical Foundation for Interreligious Dialogue: Examining the Proposal of Bernard Lonergan,” *Philosophy and Theology* 24 (2012) 113–35, esp. 127–29.

<sup>70</sup> Doran develops this argument by stating that basic sin and moral evils “stem from what Christian doctrine calls ‘original sin’” (“Nonviolent Cross” 57). Dadosky complements the work of mimetic theorists such as Girard and James Alison. While such theorists tend to emphasize envy as the nature of original sin, Dadosky, following Aquinas, argues that the root of sin is pride because “every sin of envy implies pride” (“Woman without Envy” 29).

<sup>71</sup> Lonergan, *Insight* 741.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. At the end of the chapter Lonergan expands this idea: “The realization of the solution and its development in each of us is principally the work of God, who illuminates our intellects to understand what we had not understood and to grasp as unconditioned what we had reputed as error, who breaks the bonds of our habitual unwillingness to be utterly genuine in intelligent inquiry and critical reflection by inspiring the hope that reinforces the detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know and by infusing the charity, the love, that bestows on intelligence the fullness of life” (ibid. 751).

of evil.”<sup>73</sup> Lonergan and Girard, therefore, agree that only by grace is evil overcome.

From a Catholic perspective, any mention of grace requires at least some consideration of its mediation. How is the grace that makes it possible to transcend evil mediated to us in the concrete histories of our lives? I now turn to this question.

### THE MEDIATION OF GRACE AND THE (RE)DIRECTION OF DESIRE

If the question of the mediation of grace is a quintessentially Catholic concern, then at its heart lies the church’s sacramental system.<sup>74</sup> Traditional Roman Catholic doctrine affirms that the sacraments function as symbols that mediate grace in space and time.<sup>75</sup> In this section I bring this teaching into conversation with the previous reflections on the hermeneutics of desire. Can we think of the sacraments as directing or redirecting our desires, particularly as they are experienced in both their sensitive/psychic and spiritual dimensions?<sup>76</sup> A good place to begin looking for some answers to this question is Stephen Happel’s reflection on Lonergan’s rather underdeveloped contributions to the field of sacramentology.

Happel makes several statements that link sacraments and desire, but perhaps the most striking is his assertion that “participants in the

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 762. In *Method in Theology* Lonergan pursues a strikingly similar line of thought in his discussion of progress and decline. The promotion of progress, which is conceived of as overcoming evil with good, depends on self-sacrificing love or religious charity, which comes as the gift of sanctifying grace. At the same time, in the language of interiority, Lonergan identifies religious experience with “being in love unrestrictedly” (*Method in Theology* 107, 117).

<sup>74</sup> I do not intend to suggest that Christians of other traditions have no sacramental concern or sensibility. For a recent study that attests to a Protestant appreciation of sacramentality, see Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). At the same time, I must mention Eastern Christianity’s deep appreciation of sacramentality; see, e.g., Joseph H. J. Leach and Lawrence Cross, *Image, Symbol, and Mystery: An Eastern Christian View of the Sacraments* (Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1997] no. 1084).

<sup>76</sup> This question implies that desire is an essential feature of human beings and can be influenced by sacramental practice. More generally, the implication is that the “symbol systems” of religious traditions bear directly upon the desires of those who are involved with them. The reference to “symbol system” as a universal feature of religions is borrowed from Lindbeck (see *Nature of Doctrine* 20).

sacraments achieve a union with a tradition of converting experience which, in turn, transforms their own thoughts and desires.”<sup>77</sup> Though brief, this claim expresses several significant theological propositions that need to be acknowledged and distinguished from one another. The first is that the sacraments draw people into the context of community by involving them in and with a tradition. In other words, while sacramental participation is personal, it is neither exclusively private nor individualistic.<sup>78</sup> The second proposition is that the Roman Catholic tradition provides, via its sacramental system, a means by which people experience conversion. (From a Lonerganian perspective any such experience would involve conversion in its intellectual, moral, and/or religious dimensions.<sup>79</sup>) The third proposition is that conversion, in the broadest sense, involves the transformation of desires. Happel indicates what this might mean by highlighting the potential of the sacraments to undo the social decline that is both generated and perpetuated by sin.<sup>80</sup> He expands upon this by referencing Lonergan’s notion of the “social surd” and by claiming that the sacraments play an indispensable role in overcoming it.<sup>81</sup> In speaking of decline and the social surd, Happel adduces the fact that life as we know it is plagued by the problem of evil. In terms of Lonergan’s transcendental analysis, we could say that this problem is in large part due to the failure of individuals and societies to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible, that is, to be something less than fully self-transcendent and therefore inauthentic.<sup>82</sup> Over against this failure, the sacraments direct the spiritual dimension of our desire in a way that allows us to fulfill our capacity for

<sup>77</sup> Stephen Happel, “The Sacraments: Symbols That Redirect Our Desires,” in *The Desires of the Human Heart: An Introduction to the Theology of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Vernon Gregson (New York: Paulist, 1988) 237–54, at 247.

<sup>78</sup> This idea is inspired by Lonergan’s claim that “although conversion is intensely personal, it is not purely private” (*Method in Theology* 269).

<sup>79</sup> See *ibid.* 238–43; Vernon Gregson, “The Desire to Know: Intellectual Conversion,” in *Desires of the Human Heart* 16–35; Walter E. Conn, “The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion,” in *Desires of the Human Heart* 36–55; and Denise Lardner Carmody, “The Desire for Transcendence: Religious Conversion,” in *Desires of the Human Heart* 57–73. Doran’s development of psychic conversion could also be added to this series; see, e.g., *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1990) 42–63.

<sup>80</sup> Happel, “Symbols that Redirect Our Desires” 246.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 247. Dadosky helpfully avers that the social surd is used “to describe impossible conditions or completely unintelligible behavior” (“Naming the Demon” 360).

<sup>82</sup> See Lonergan, *Insight* 651–52, and his assertion in *Method in Theology* that “man achieves authenticity [only] in self-transcendence” (104).

self-transcendence. That is, the sacraments nourish the transcendental desire of the human spirit by mediating God's grace. Can a similar claim be made with regard to the psychic dimension of desire as described by Doran? Happel suggests that it can.

The claim that allows the sacraments to be understood as operating in the psychic dimension of desire is the one in which Happel affirms that "through bodily [i.e., sacramental] participation, the worshipper explores the communal images which record the subversive memory of Jesus as well as the transformations enacted by earlier communities of believers."<sup>83</sup> To be sure, such a claim resounds strongly with Girard's thoughts on mimetic desire. For Girard, "the subversive memory of Jesus" is the memory of how he successfully unmasked the violence of the scapegoat mechanism that has its roots in mimetic desire. In addition, as previously pointed out, not only does Jesus lay bare the scapegoat mechanism; he also overcomes it by rising from the dead.<sup>84</sup> Indeed "the subversive memory of Jesus" is not only a matter of cognition, that is, of remembering something of the past during liturgical celebrations. The fact that this event and its memory occasioned transformation in the earliest disciples signifies that it had ethical implications by causing some definite changes in what they said and did. In other words, the memory of the Christ event transformed the way the disciples acted and was therefore existentially significant.<sup>85</sup> In the measure that this memory remains truly alive today, it continues to effect similar transformation. More specifically, it encourages a movement away from negative mimesis toward nonrivalrous love, even to the point of sacrificing or suffering for the sake of others. Doran has offered an insightful theological reflection on this idea by positing the notion of a "mimesis of God," by which "we are moved beyond the otherwise endless cycle of violence, recrimination, judgment, blame, accusation, murder, hate and false religion."<sup>86</sup> From a Catholic perspective this memory is perpetuated in the hearts and minds of peoples and communities via

<sup>83</sup> Happel, "Symbols that Redirect Our Desires" 247.

<sup>84</sup> For Girard, the resurrection is an "objective fact," which can be understood in contrast to it as an "interpretive event" as it was argued, for example, by Rudolf Bultmann. See Girard, *Girard Reader* 280.

<sup>85</sup> If I understand him correctly, Doran makes this point by distinguishing between the Passion narratives as texts and as events ("Lonergan and Girard on Redemption" 59).

<sup>86</sup> Robert M. Doran, "Being in Love with God: A Source of Analogies for Theological Understanding," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (2008) 227–42, at 237. See also Doran "Summarizing 'Imitating the Divine Relations: A Theological Contribution to Mimetic Theory,'" *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14 (2007) 27–38.

the sacraments, and perhaps most especially in the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the sacraments, as concrete and visible signs and instruments of God's self-communication, provide the condition of possibility for the "mimesis of God."

In engaging the question of the sacraments and positing their essential role in overcoming violence with good, it may seem that I have distanced myself from my original concern with interreligious dialogue. While it is true that the question of sacramental mediation raises problems for interreligious (as well as ecumenical) dialogue, it is a theme that cannot be sidestepped. In bringing this essay to a close I point out that though such problems exist, they do not foreclose the possibility of meaningful dialogue; in fact, they may very well open up promising lines of further inquiry, which I elucidate below.

### CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR DIALOGUE

In the relatively brief history of the Catholic theology of religions, the notion of mediation has incited a good bit of controversy. Though controversy is usually uncomfortable, it often provides the impetus needed to move a particular question forward.<sup>88</sup> The foregoing reflections on religious experience and desire bring the theme of mediation to the forefront. In this context, the question concerns how we might be able to speak about the mediation of grace and religious experience while at the same time acknowledging their influence on human desire.

In light of the many and significant differences among religious traditions, such as doctrinal differences, one issue that must be confronted concerns the different understandings of desire. As it has been presented here, desire is a fundamental and even indispensable feature of a specifically but not exclusively Christian anthropology. Though Girard is highly critical of mimetic desire as acquisitive or appropriative, he does not argue

<sup>87</sup> Happel suggests that the Eucharist has a certain primacy of place: "The narrative structure of the Eucharist . . . encourages our participation in the willing acceptance of others' suffering" ("Symbols that Redirect Our Desires" 247).

<sup>88</sup> Jacques Dupuis, e.g., knew of this discomfort. His ideas—not surprisingly, precisely those related to the theme of mediation—drew scrutiny from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). His thoughts on participated forms of mediation were understood to treat religions as independent ways of salvation, thereby calling into question the church's universal mediatory role in the cause of salvation. See Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 177–79, 351 (the Notification issued by the CDF is found on pp. 434–37); and Gerald O'Collins, S.J., "Jacques Dupuis: The Ongoing Debate," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 642–64.

for its full-fledged renunciation. Rather, he maintains that it ought to be transformed so as to obviate its negative, violent potential.<sup>89</sup> As for Lonergan, his commitment to the centrality of desire is clearly evidenced by his insistence that humans are transcendental beings who, by nature, desire to understand intelligently, judge reasonably, and decide and act responsibly. In terms of other religions, the question of how they perceive desire and how humans should relate to it is a complex one. Nonetheless, some qualified suggestions can be put forward, especially as a means of encouraging further study in comparative perspective.

One difficulty that arises when considering the notion of desire is the tendency of some Christians to oversimplify or misconceive how other religious persons understand it. In fact, it is an error of interpretation that issues from a lack of familiarity with how desire is experienced and understood by other religious persons. In these instances we should be grateful to thinkers such as Lindbeck and Proudfoot who recognized (but perhaps also overvalued) the importance of interpretation.<sup>90</sup> Girard slips into the error of misinterpretation and hence misunderstanding, when he claims that in contrast to Christianity, Buddhism advocates a simple renunciation of desire.<sup>91</sup> Such a claim would most certainly be disputed by some Buddhists; they may first point to the fact that misunderstanding of their position on desire may well be due to faulty translation and semantics. As I have explained, in the Christian tradition the word “desire” can signify a longing for bad as well as for good things. For example, mimetic desire can be either bad or good; it can lead to violence or to self-sacrificing love. Buddhists distinguish sharply between desire as bad and desire as good; they express this distinction by using two different Sanskrit words, *tanha* and *chanda*. While *tanha* refers to negative desires and addictions (i.e., cravings, in contemporary English), *chanda* is reserved for good or wholesome desires.<sup>92</sup> Buddhism’s Second Noble Truth, which elucidates the cause of suffering, declares that it is *tanha* that needs to be renounced, not *chanda*. To claim, as the early Girard does, that for Buddhists, all desire needs to be renounced, issues in the paradox that nirvana can be achieved without desiring it.<sup>93</sup> Aside

<sup>89</sup> Girard, *Girard Reader* 63.

<sup>90</sup> As indicated above, in contrast to Lindbeck and Proudfoot, Lonergan recognizes the importance and necessity of interpretation, but its role as one of the eight functional specialties allows it to be appreciated in a more balanced perspective.

<sup>91</sup> Girard, *Girard Reader* 63.

<sup>92</sup> See, e.g., Charles S. Prebish and Damien Keown, *Introducing Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 47.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* The term “religious end” is borrowed from S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

from pointing up the importance of proceeding with caution when using terms across religious traditions, the larger lesson to be learned is that if a hermeneutics of desire is to be used by Christians in a dialogue of religious experience, it must remain open to the critique of their religious interlocutors. In other words, the interpretation of the meaning of "desire" must be plainly put on the conversation table. This is not, however, an invitation to enter into endless linguistic games, for what is interpreted must have some referent in the lived experience of those who use it in religiously meaningful fashion.

Another point for discussion pertains to the practices by which desire is engaged, either in order to overcome its negative aspects or to promote its positive potential. The foregoing reflections on sacramental mediation provide a suitable starting point from which Christians could broach this difficult question. Obviously, they cannot expect their dialogue partners to share their convictions on the primacy of the sacraments. However, this does not mean that the dialogue cannot move forward.<sup>94</sup> For example, common to all religious practices, however different, is a symbol system. The point at stake, and the one that can lead to productive dialogue, is that religious people do certain things and act in certain ways to achieve the religious end proposed to them by their tradition. To be religious, therefore, means to be a "doer" within the context of a tradition. Ultimately, no dialogue can remain in the realm of ideas, but must refer to what religious persons do. This is to say that dialogue can find a point of entry in experience and, beyond that, in an understanding of the meanings discerned in different experiences through symbolic mediatory realities.<sup>95</sup>

It is doubtful that Schleiermacher ever imagined that the impetus he gave to the notion of religious experience would extend into a world-historical context in which this notion is central to interreligious

<sup>94</sup> Petillo has suggested that different religious practices may actually be complementary. He argues that if the belief in a common consciousness of grace is presupposed by Christians, then they may legitimately appropriate Buddhist spiritual practices to mediate and heighten their experience of divine love. Petillo's proposal is qualified in the sense that he does not explicitly defend the view that there is a parity between Christian sacramental practices and Buddhist spiritual practices. See Petillo, "Universalist Philosophy of Religious Experience" 958.

<sup>95</sup> Constraints of space do not allow a discussion on the differences in the mediatory realities of different religious traditions, but see Petillo's suggestion that the divine self-emanation techniques of Tantric Buddhism and the practices of Zazen meditation heighten the experience of divine love and unlock depths of meaning that issue from it ("Universalist Philosophy of Religious Experience" 958).

dialogue. Doran's proposal of a hermeneutics of desire admirably balances the role of religious experience with the necessity of interpreting how it comes to expression in different ways of desiring. In light of this proposal, perhaps the next step is to test it out in the "field of religious diversity" and in the actual practice of dialogue on religious experience. At the end of the day, it is there that our proposals will prove to be either merely bright and complicated ideas or valuable tools for interreligious learning.